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THE EFFECT OF THE WAR ON ENGLISH CHORAL MUSIC

By HERBERT ANTCLIFFE

SEPARATED by twenty miles and more of water from the districts where the main events of the World War have taken place, England has suffered comparatively little in the way of physical or even moral devastation. Nevertheless the country has not escaped a number of serious effects, particularly in its social and artistic life. The music of the people in its most crude and elementary states has been changed to a certain extent and reduced in its quantity, while still more has this been the case with singing in its higher artistic forms. Certain obvious and inevitable effects upon art are caused by every social upheaval, and the forms of art most affected are naturally those which concern the social life of the majority. So far as choral music is affected this has been chiefly in the number of people available to take part in it and the quality of the voices of those who have done so.

With the majority of both men and women between 20 and 40 years of age either engaged directly in the actual fighting or doing work ancillary to it which demands long hours and great energy, there has been a considerable reduction in the number of choral performances of all kinds. One of the first actions affecting choral music which occurred on the outbreak of war was the closing down of all the great English triennial festivals. Birmingham, Leeds, Sheffield and the Three Choirs' Festivals, besides smaller ones such as Lincoln and Tewkesbury, and some of the combined Church Choir festivals, ceased to exist at least for a time. Whether their restoration is desirable or not may be debatable, but there can be no doubt that at the moment their cessation was an appreciable loss. It was the result of the dispersal of many bands of singers, but it resulted in the dispersal of still more. It threw out of artistic employment many who would have been actively and, both to themselves and others, usefully employed in making music.

The fact that such music would not have been of the highest character, that is, that some of it would actually be inferior music, and all of it would be given in circumstances which preclude

any near approach to a perfect performance, is a detail which modifies only slightly the nature and extent of the evil. It is surely better to sing fifth-rate music in a second rate manner than not to sing at all; and, as a matter of fact, much of the music in the programmes of these festivals was the very greatest ever composed or ever to be composed, while some of the performances had excellent characteristics.

More serious in its effect upon artistic results has been the disturbance of balance in the choruses themselves. Naturally the larger choirs have suffered less than the smaller ones, and Church choirs have suffered very seriously indeed in this respect. So much is this so that one well-known Cathedral choir—boys and men—has been left for a couple of years with but one adult member. Unfortunately, there has not been a corresponding growth in women's voice choirs, and some even of these have disappeared. Women have found new interests in the hospitals as nurses or other assistants, or in the various offices and auxiliary corps attached to the army and navy.

One kind of choir which the war has brought into prominence but which had existed before the war in less numbers (I believe it is much more common in America than in England) is the factory or office choir. Some of these have done remarkably well, possibly because they generally have been formed in places where important war work has been carried on, and where the drain of men to swell the fighting ranks has been comparatively light, so that a considerable number of all voices have been available. It is in the industrial centres alone that the competition festivals have managed to keep afloat, and not always there. The late Dr. W. G. McNaught, who probably did more adjudicating at such festivals than anyone else, told me some little time before he died that most of his work of this character had ceased. Nor have other adjudicators had a much larger proportion of their former work.

Choirs entering for these competitions, along with all other choirs, have declined somewhat in quality owing to the inevitable falling off in the amount of individual practice obtained by the members. The wiser conductors have for this reason insisted upon fewer performances in order to have the works as perfectly prepared as possible.

Doubtless the causes for much of the decline in choral music are obvious circumstantial ones; but there is certainly also a psychological cause, or rather two psychological causes which may be additional to these but are not unconnected with them.

The first of these is the actual mourning arising from death and disaster or from the general feeling for the distress of the nation. This does not interfere with the desire to sing, but it does interfere with the desire for social life; which, after all, is one of the mainsprings of success in large communal matters, whether political or artistic. The attraction of like to like has made more successful choral bodies than any positive interest in choral music, and the desire for solitude or retirement which comes from sorrow or distress militates against it.

Quite opposite is the second cause, which is the reaction from this feeling and leads to a desire for the lighter and less active forms of enjoyment, or where activity is desired to a demand for the more exciting kinds. We thus find that some who in *antebellum* days would have found their chief or only amusement in choral singing have turned for at least a part of their relaxation to the moving pictures, the revue and, latterly, to the ballroom. The question of available audiences has also been affected in the same way, as few societies can be kept afloat merely with rehearsals, and equally few can give concerts without the financial support of large audiences.

Yet after the first shock which demoralised the world of music to some extent and created much misgiving among the more timid, the effect was not so disastrous as might have been expected. Curiously, the reports from different chorus masters in the same centres vary considerably. One director of several of the largest choirs in the country says: "The men have kept up wonderfully well; mostly elderly, but as they are taught to keep their voices young by proper production we have been well served." Another in the same district says that the chief ill-effect of the war has been "to hold up for the time the work of many of the smaller societies owing to the calling up of the men, and to limit the efforts of the bigger societies for the same reason." Still another says that "there has been a disturbance of balance in Choral Societies," and that he has had to get over the difficulty by "borrowing" men from one society to feed another in an adjacent town. All these are in the great choral district of Yorkshire.

In the West of England, which is the other great choral district, a conductor covering a fairly wide area writes, "I had three societies going when the war began, but they all stopped, and I have only given one concert with a full (mixed) chorus since, and that was for the Arts Fund. The difficulty has been, of course, to get men; those who were possible singers were for the

most part engaged on some public or national work, Red Cross, Special Constable, &c., &c.”

Contrast this with a report from an amateur (but very talented) conductor in a neighbourhood not many miles from that of the last. “We had grave doubts in 1914,” he says, “as to the wisdom of ‘carrying on,’ but are now very glad we did so. A decided increase in choir membership (ladies), a 50 per cent. addition to our subscribers and a doubled audience have proved to us that the work of the Society is increasingly valued. How much of this may be due to the high wages which many people are now receiving I do not know. Though in our eighteen years of existence we have never succeeded in making our concerts pay for themselves, yet the last four seasons have been our best financially. In 1914 we had to take a fresh rehearsal room, owing to the military occupancy of our old Hall, and for a similar reason we were driven from our Concert room. We are now holding our concerts in the largest hall in the City with the result stated above. Of course, we lost a large proportion of our Choir men, and we missed them sorely as at the best they, especially the tenors, have not been quite strong enough. This year we have been obliged to refuse a number of lady applicants for membership so as to preserve a semblance of balance. We are gradually righting this, however, as one by one it is our pleasure to receive back our old members again. The new activities of the women do not seem to have affected their love of music, for a number of our members came to our weekly rehearsals straight from their munition or hospital work, etc. Two or three of the Bristol societies had to suspend operations, owing to war conditions, but I hope they will soon be restarting. I am glad to say that the Bristol Choral Society under our great choral conductor Mr. George Riseley is going strong.”

Two directly military matters have affected the activities of many choralists who themselves have, for reasons of age, physical disability or the practice of “pivot” trades or professions, been exempted from the necessity of undertaking duties in the field or otherwise remote from their homes and usual habitats. The first of these is the one mentioned in the letter just quoted; namely, the commandeering by the military authorities of halls of many sizes and kinds. These have ranged from huge buildings such as the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, London, and great Corn Exchanges (which in many towns are the only available buildings for concerts on a really large scale) down to school-rooms and parish-halls built to accommodate a couple of hundred people or less. The kind of note one receives on this subject may

be gathered from a single example, written four months after the commencement of the Armistice. "The Exhibition Hall," says the writer, "is still in the occupation of the military, and the smaller hall won't hold chorus *and* orchestra, but we have done choral concerts there the last two seasons." So possibly the War may have helped towards a fuller appreciation of pure choralism.

The other matter is the one bit of real warfare that England saw; the air- and sea-raids. Naturally the towns near the East coast suffered the most, and in one large town which stood in danger of both kinds of raid, the authorities deemed it wise to close down evening concerts entirely, which, of course, put choral music in the larger sense out of existence for the time being. Towns further West continued their musical activities in spite of difficulties. One of these difficulties may be illustrated by a personal experience.

The Oriana Madrigal Society, one of the leading, though not one of the largest, choral bodies in London had announced a concert for a certain evening shortly before Christmas, 1917. An hour or so before the time it was to begin I was preparing to start for the hall when suddenly there occurred a violent cannonade by anti-aircraft guns in the immediate neighbourhood. Discretion suggested remaining in the comparative safety of one's own home, and this course was followed. It was followed also by most members of the chorus and audience, including newspaper critics, while those who had started on their way sought the nearest tube railway station or other 'funk hole,' and remained there until the raiders had departed. The raid was long and severe so that a postponement of the concert was unavoidable; but it was only a postponement, for the concert took place a few days later, when the enemy was considerate enough to stay away until it was over.

To the native composer the war has not been without certain advantages, the chief of which has been the banishment (or should we say the deportation?) of many inferior German works. In keeping with the traditional character of the English people, however, German and Austrian works generally have been allowed to retain much of their position. Handel and Bach, with some Haydn and Mozart were to be expected, while Mendelssohn was not surprising. It seemed something of an anomaly that one of the most popular "In Memoriam" works was Brahms' *Ein Deutsches Requiem!* Whether this was "trading with the enemy" or "spoiling the Egyptians" is a question which may be left to be

decided by those more intimately concerned than is the present writer. As it is presumable that no performing fee was paid or payable it is probable those who chose the work for performance would consider it to be the latter.

Walford Davies' *Everyman*, Stanford's *Te Deum* and *Stabat Mater*, Boughton's *Midnight*, Bath's *Wedding of Shon Maclean*, Elgar's *The Music Makers*, Holst's *Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda* and Vaughan Williams' *Fantasie on Christmas Carols*, *Towards the Unknown Region* and *A Sea Symphony*, besides Parry's *Blest Pair of Sirens* and Charles Wood's *Dirge of Two Veterans*, are among standard native works which have been sung from time to time, and less well-known works have had some hearing.

New choral compositions have come forward, but not often, during the war. Most notable among these is Elgar's *The Spirit of England*, which, written in three sections, was not heard in its entirety for some months after the first section had become more or less familiar. Though not necessarily a *pièce d'occasion*, it owes its inspiration in both words (by Lawrence Binyon) and music to the war. It is not in manner or style, nor except at irregular and not too frequent intervals, in musical value comparable with his earlier choral works, and in depth of feeling it certainly will not approach his *Dream of Gerontius*. Nevertheless it is of a sufficiently high standard of inspiration and workmanship to maintain the composer's reputation, while the performances of it that have been given in many parts of the country are evidence that choralists have been alive to the fact that at least one British composer is still writing music of a high type.

Ernest Austin, who is best known for his teaching pieces for the piano and for one or two organ and chamber works has also had new works produced by Dr. Coward and his Leeds choir. His *Hymn to Apollo* has been acclaimed as a remarkably fine work, and a later one, *Hymn to the Night*, received a very warm welcome. It is rare for a large choir such as this to produce two new works by a single composer at consecutive concerts, but whether this has arisen from sheer merit or from the shortage of other new choral works of high standing is not clear. There have been a few smaller works possessing excellent qualities produced, of which the one that has evoked the greatest interest is C. H. Moody's *Choral Elegy* sung by the composer's Huddersfield Glee and Madrigal Society both in their own town and by invitation at a memorial service in Westminster Abbey.

But the effect of the war upon British Choral music is not so much a matter of the present and the past as of the future.

Though the war itself cannot have any directly good effect, some of its circumstances undoubtedly will do so. The gathering together of thousands of men in intimate, if primitive and uncomfortable circumstances, the frequent need of occupation of a restful character alike to bodies, minds and nerves, and of forgetfulness of the sordid horrors which war brings in its train, have made all classes of Englishmen discover themselves musically. Already the so-called lower middle classes, the clerks and smaller professional men and the workingmen with comfortable incomes, formed the backbone of the music, and particularly of the choral music of England. But though England has for so long been a great choral country, those who have taken part in the art have formed a comparatively small proportion of the whole population. Thanks to the efforts of the Young Men's Christian Association, the Church Army, the Catholic Recreation Huts and other organised means of recreation provision for the soldiers, the majority of those who voluntarily or by compulsion joined the army have now learnt some of its joys and their own capabilities with regard to it. Allowing for all the falling off which will come from various circumstances, it seems probable that a very large number of men who have never taken any interest in the subject will now take something more than a spectacular interest. That is, a by no means negligible proportion of the population of the country will find a new pleasure in partsongs, cantatas and oratorios. And with this on the part of the male population will come in a body of women who will find their first interest in the men themselves, but a secondary one and probably a growing one in the music itself. This, of course, is only the seed; what the fruit will be depends largely upon the organisers of societies, choirs and festivals. Some fruit it will bear, and there are not wanting signs that with the gradual settling down of the people to their daily avocations the harvest will be rich alike in quality and quantity. At the time of writing, that is quite near the close of the ordinary season for choral practice, notice comes to hand of several choirs revived, of others newly formed, and of generally renewed interest in the subject. This is in addition to the huge choirs formed specially for peace celebrations which, striking as they will doubtless be, have an interest and influence which is only passing.

Even out of the distresses and disabilities of many who have suffered grievously in health and estate may come some good. Sir Arthur Pearson, the well-known journalist, who early in the war period founded St. Dunstan's Hostel for Blinded Soldiers,

hit upon the happy expedient of raising money by Carol Choirs at Christmas time, and many of these choirs once formed will not readily be dissolved. They will continue their existence, doing perhaps only minor work, but work which will help in the building up of a choral fabric of considerable magnitude and value. Many of the maimed and lamed and blind themselves, too, are taking a higher interest in the technical and artistic sides of music than could have been thought possible five years ago, and their assistance will also be very great as it becomes more fully available. The number of practising musicians may have been reduced by some of those who were in the profession becoming government servants or entering into commercial pursuits, but the surplus is more than made up by those who perforce have had to seek occupations which require but little physical force or activity, and have turned to the higher or lower ranks of music for such occupations. That they are not only capable and enthusiastic musicians, but have also the personality that is necessary for organising and leading large bodies of their fellows, has been proved in the strenuous sphere of camp life, where in many cases they have formed choirs which, if not capable of high artistic flights, have at least given a good account of themselves in music of no unworthy character.

Women, too, have had opportunities of proving their capabilities as choral conductors, and, while it would be rash to suggest that for many years to come there is any likelihood of a great woman choral director, already quite a considerable number of women have shown that they can handle a chorus of a hundred or two members with no little skill and firmness. The woman conductor before the war was no longer unique or isolated, but owing to the war her existence now scarcely calls for more than a passing comment. How far circumstances and their own potentialities will allow women to enter into competition with men, especially in conducting choirs of mixed voices, remains to be seen. At present their activities are confined mainly, but by no means entirely, to choirs formed of their own sex. In the year 1918, and particularly towards its close, after the Armistice had been arrived at, there was some increase in the number and size of these choirs, but it was not sufficient to make any material difference in the choral singing of the country.

The greatest danger to English choral music consequent on the renewed interest brought about by the war is that of a return to the methods which make for robustness rather than for subtlety and refinement. I do not suggest, of course, that the work of such

men as Coward, Riseley, Benton, and still more that of Henry Leslie and Joseph Barnby and many smaller but excellent choir-trainers will be lost. Possibly the actual quantity of fine choral singing will not be decreased, but as the number of choirs and singers increases it is not unlikely that the proportion of such singing will be less, until the time when those who have learnt the better methods have imbued their fellows with their own spirit and knowledge. And it would not appear that this will be done quickly.

One of the most hopeful signs for the future is the improving standard both of music and performance in the part of Church choirs, and particularly of those in the smaller churches and the poorer ones. Talking to the adviser to a large firm of publishers which deals mainly in easy choral music I was informed that in the last two or three years the standard of works demanded had risen in a remarkable degree, while the time and care devoted to rehearsal had increased in a corresponding degree. There is a growing demand on all sides for the best works of native composers, particularly of those of the 16th and 17th centuries. Several reasons are assignable for the choice of the older music, not the least being its comparative simplicity from the standpoint of both singer and hearer.

For this improved standard of taste the war is directly, though only partially accountable. The way had at least been prepared, and the principal requirement was proof, alike to choralists and choirmasters, that what was admitted in theory to be the better music was not only actually so in practice but was also within their capabilities of appreciation and performance. In their new experiences in camp and hospital and in strange towns and villages both at home and abroad those who took up soldiering or nursing or munition making saw the best and the worst of the work of other choirs; they heard this music sung by choirs consisting of no better material than their own, and with good effect. They formed or joined choirs in conditions that previously they would have considered impossible. Moreover they have all been too near the realities to be satisfied with trivialities in serious concerns. Their own personalities have experienced an awakening shock that is being conveyed from numberless individuals to the Church choir fraternity as a whole. And how important a position the Church choir in its regular weekly work of chants and hymns and anthems holds with respect to the choral music as a whole is more readily realised now than ever. In many places, from the Cathedral City to the mining village, it has been and is

the only choral activity of the district which is pursued with any regularity, while in still more it is the nucleus around which grows a vast body of musical activity and intelligence.

The choral idiom of the country, in both composition and interpretation, seems as yet to have been little affected by the war. Based originally on Purcell and Handel, in recent years before 1914, it was modified by the growing knowledge of the works of Bach, and also, though less strongly, by Wagnerian and French influences. Most of the composers affected by the last of these were young men, and they have been too busy with their part in the fighting to do any musical work in which this influence is evident. Classical German influence, that of Handel, Bach, Haydn, Mendelssohn and Brahms, cannot but continue to be active in these matters, while the music of the associated powers is too little concerned with choirs such as those through which the northern nations find their national musical expression for its influence to be otherwise than, at the most, indirect. And as to the French and Italian methods of choral interpretation, these have scarcely come within the line of observation of the average British musician, so that the tradition remains on the lines laid down by native conductors modified only by the work of occasional visiting composers from abroad.

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Postscript: As the foregoing article was written very shortly after the beginning of the Armistice, it is interesting to note some of the developments which the periods of preparation for peace have brought about. Naturally, the demobilisation of the bulk of the army, and the consequent cessation of many social and artistic activities connected with it, has disbanded a large number of choirs and other musical organisations. Some of these have been re-formed as civilian bodies, but the members of most of them have been scattered far and wide, and only a portion, of what comparative size it is impossible to ascertain, have thought it worth while to join the older bodies or to assist in forming new ones. Yet the older ones have in a large number of cases grown to dimensions unthought of before the war, and new ones have sprung up with mushroom rapidity, and generally, with remarkably complete equipment both vocal and technical. In Central London alone—perhaps the least chorally inclined district in the world—one choir of something over 300 voices, which is drawing audiences of several thousands, and a number of smaller ones have

been formed. In the suburbs and the provinces there are even greater signs of the new interest.

A typical instance of what is happening in industrial circles may be given. At one of the great munition factories of the North a clerk, who was formerly a teacher of music, but lost his practice through the war, has been actually, though not nominally, installed as musical director. Among the staff and workmen, numbering some five or six thousand, he has found material for a first-rate chorus of a hundred or more, besides an orchestra and several smaller instrumental combinations.

This work, of course, started during the War, but the shorter hours of labour now obtaining has allowed of a considerable development of it. In the same town a change has come over the well-to-do inhabitants who formerly supported choral music only by a nominal or slight monetary patronage in the same way as they supported the humble flowershows of the workers. Now they are beginning to take their part in the singing, and while the two leading societies report increased membership recruited largely from these classes, new societies are being formed in rich suburban districts where circumstances exclude all but the financially well-favoured.

It does not appear that progress is quite so rapid in the West, but there is a large degree of restoration, a number of dormant societies having reawakened, and some new ones are being formed.

What is still more gratifying is the standard of taste which is being shown both by the choirs and their audiences. Not only are the performances as good as, and often much better than, those of pre-war days, but the choice of works is altogether on a higher plane. Rarely now do we hear the feeble Mendelssohn-and-water works which were common up to 1914; though in justice it must be said that the decline in their popularity started with the growth of the competition festival. This last, with its encouragement of a *cappella* singing is reviving rapidly. In every case that has come under my observation the adjudicators have been musicians not only of high standing and ability, but of high ideals in this particular matter. Moreover the organising committees generally appear to be imbued with the same spirit.

Some attempts have been made to restore the great triennial festivals, but generally the feeling is that at least 'the time is not yet', and meetings to discuss the matter have generally been adjourned for a long period. One may safely prophesy that few will be restored, and that such as are will take a new form, and will have a greater infusion of purely musical aim.

As to Church choirs the progress seems to be slower, but apparently it has reached the same point as in August, 1914, and there is reason to believe it will soon pass this. The chief drawback, as a rule, is the old one of 'too much attempted, little done,' combined with 'the tyranny of the organ'.

H. A.